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We may conclude then that Jesus was consciously revolutionary, but not a revolutionist. He did not draw the sword against the authority of Jerusalem or of Rome. Nevertheless his messianic program included the downfall of both of them and the establishment in their place of a new social order and authority—that of the Kingdom of God. He did not, therefore, recognize the author-

ity of either Jerusalem or Rome. He was no “good citizen” in the modern sense. To God and that new order his whole loyalty was given. Other things in comparison were matters of indifference. He might appear a fanatic or a rebel and die in consequence on the cross—he would be loyal still—through his very suffering the Kingdom would surely come.

THE PROPHETS AND THE SOCIAL QUESTION

ALEXANDER R. GORDON, D.LITT.

Professor of Old Testament Literature and Exegesis,
Presbyterian College, Montreal, Canada

It is interesting to see how in these days we are turning back to the prophets. Some men go to them and return with amazing “fulfilments.” Other men find in the prophets a forecasting as to when the world is to come to an end. All such misinterpretations are calculated to do harm. In any case they miss the great message of the prophets. PROFESSOR GORDON’S treatment will help us to see what they are—the discoverers and revealers of God in current events.

The atomistic conception of personality is a late development in Old Testament thought. Till the breakdown of the nation under the Babylonian Exile both religion and ethics are predominantly social. The individual Israelite enjoys fellowship with God and lives the life well pleasing to him only by virtue of his relationship to his people. This social interest pervades especially the prophetic teaching. The prophets may denounce private sins and call for personal holiness; but the ideal they hold before the minds of their hearers is

that of a righteous, pure, and holy nation that shall prove the channel of salvation to all the ends of the earth. And this is the note which makes their commanding oracles ring so clearly in harmony with our modern aspirations.

It may seem to many, perhaps, a misguided effort to apply principles suitable for a simple age like that in which the prophets lived to the vastly more complex and intricate conditions of the present. But if we read the prophets with any real sympathy we shall be continually astonished at their freshness

of outlook. The *species* under which they viewed the movements of their time were the eternal principles of faith and conduct. The prophets were essentially men of spiritual vision who brought their God-inspired insight to bear directly on the practical needs of the day. "Times change, and we change in them." But the fundamental realities abide. The principles which the prophets exalted as the standards of social well-being are as valid now as ever they were. For the social problem is not economic alone. At bottom it is moral and religious. So, after our economists have taught us all they can of the science of distribution and the laws that make for wealth and poverty, we must still turn to seers like the prophets of Israel for spiritual enlightenment and guidance, for the quickening of the sense of humanity and God. There could, indeed, be found no better corrective to the cold-blooded methods of the current political economy than the warm human sympathy which beats through every utterance of the prophets. For to them the social question was one, not of the wealth, but of the manhood and womanhood of nations.

The age of the first great prophets was in many respects parallel to our own. The period of disorder that succeeded the disruption had given place to an era of abounding prosperity. Under the auspices of the two long and brilliant reigns of Jeroboam II in the north and his contemporary Uzziah the Great in Judah, victory had once more crowned the arms of Israel, and the bounds of the nation were extended to their ideal range from the Orontes to the Dead Sea. With military prestige came rich com-

mercial expansion, wealth, and luxury. As the result, life tended increasingly to be measured by mere money standards, and the gulf that separated rich and poor yawned ever wider. The simple old life of Israel had been charged with a spirit of brotherhood that made the lot of the poorest fairly comfortable and happy. But with the new passion for wealth a harder tone began to prevail. Rich men coveted their neighbors' fields and ousted them from hearth and home, reducing them to drudges or driving them altogether from the soil to swell the ranks of the struggling proletariat in the city. To further their own pleasure they thought little of trampling down the toil-worn laborer, refusing him an honest wage, and for the debt even of "a pair of shoes" selling him into slavery. Thus over against the brilliant debauchery of the court circles rose the dark shadow of pauperism. Crushed down beneath the heel of the rich, robbed alike of their livelihood and their self-respect, often without a cloak in which to wrap themselves for the night, the poor dragged on their miserable existence with apparently no pity or help from God or man; for the most hopeless feature of the social condition of Israel was that the wealthy classes had yoked the state religion to their own chariot and used it for their personal advantage. The contempt with which Amos' burning words were hurled back upon him by Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, is an indication of how the plea for justice to the poor was scouted by mercenary clerics, whose interest in religion was bound up with the formal rites of worship and the social dignity which their priestly office

conferred upon them. Only a few devout souls here and there magnified the spirit of religion, putting brotherhood before office and mercy before sacrifice.

The social criticism of the prophets turns around three main points: the spirit that dominated the seekers of wealth, the methods by which most of them pursued their ends, and the use to which they put their money. And the sins they denounce under these several heads, translated into modern terms, are *monopoly*, *graft*, and *luxury*.

1. It is hardly possible for us to appreciate the severity of tone which the prophets adopt when they condemn the crime of removing the ancient landmark and adding field to field and house to house till but a few rich proprietors are left alone in the midst of the land. To the prophets this was no mere expansion of business or legitimate use of talents but the exploiting of human personality for gain. The ancestral inheritance was part and parcel of a man's life, the genial center of his welfare and happiness. In losing it he lost alike his home and his dignity. The rich man who evicted him from his inheritance was thus showing his utter scorn for humanity, treating human flesh and blood as chattels in the market-place, to be bought and sold at a price. The prophets have here exposed for all time the radical sinfulness of the monopolizing spirit. The craving which has so deeply infected the business life of our own age as of theirs—to gather the threads of industry into a few tyrannical hands—is the very incarnation of selfishness, which degrades man from his lofty destiny as the image of the Divine to a mere instrument for

accumulating wealth that others may enjoy.

The prophets have an equally sure sense of the economic results of monopoly. In their eyes it leads to depopulation and the curtailment rather than the increase of the staff of life.

Thus Yahweh of Hosts hath sworn in mine ears:

Of a surety many a house shall become a desolation,

Even houses great and goodly, without inhabitant;

For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath,

And an homer of seed shall yield but an ephah.¹

On the former head there will be general agreement. The problem of rural depopulation may not be so pressing on this side of the Atlantic, but in older countries it is the land question *par excellence*. One is moved often to tears by the tale of this or that "reekin' lum" (smoking chimney) which no longer wafts its blue cloudlet to the skies. And the direct source of the trouble is the encroachment of the landlord system on the ancient rights and liberties of the people. But this problem is part of a much larger one which affects all countries alike, and on the happy solution of which the welfare of nations mainly depends—I mean the housing problem. The basis of society must ever be the family. So long as a nation gives birth to healthy families, growing up amid bright, clean, pure surroundings, in the love of God and honor, it will go on prospering and to prosper. But let family life on any great scale degenerate into the wretched

¹ Isa. 5:9 f.

travesties of home which we find in our city slums, and the nation will sooner or later die of festering corruption at the heart. No wonder that governments and municipalities are everywhere awakening to the gravity of the problem. In older lands their efforts are terribly handicapped by the vested interests of the monopolies which have done so much to create the situation, and now bend all their weight on preserving the *status quo*. Let our social reformers then lay the lesson to heart and assert the rights of humanity above the personal interests of the monopolist, before the problem has reached its acute stage and while conditions are yet fluid enough to be molded into better forms.

The other aspect of the question may call forth a challenge. It is urged in defense of monopolies that concentration results in increased, because more efficient, production. From an abstract point of view this may be quite correct. But in the ultimate analysis I think the prophets' verdict is justified. For the frankly expressed aim of the monopolist is to control the markets—that is, in effect, to restrain the natural outflow of the commodities of life—for his own personal advantage and with absolute indifference to the hardships he may thus inflict on the poor. The monopolizing tendency thus constitutes one of the gravest menaces to society. The scientific economist may be content to trace the genesis and evolution of monopoly without pronouncing any moral judgment on the tendency in itself. But the Christian teacher must look deeper and study the effects of the system on personal life and character, allowing no

individual interests to outweigh the graver interests of humanity.

2. The acceptance of wealth as the measure of human achievement led to the second social crime denounced by the prophets, the injustice and oppression that lay so heavily on the land. If wealth be the end most worthy of a man's ambition, and if human hearts and hands be mere instruments in the acquisition of wealth, it matters little how these instruments be crushed or squeezed, if only more wealth be made. This was the maxim quite openly followed by many of the rich men in Israel. On every other page of the Prophets we read of the false weights and balances, the small ephahs and big shekels (that is, short measures and high prices) by which unscrupulous merchants filled their coffers at the expense of the poor. Still worse was the partiality of justice so flagrantly shown at the gates. A case at law could then easily be bought for money, so that the name of justice became a by-word, leaving a taste in the mouth like wormwood. Thus the very foundations of social existence were broken up, and Israel appeared to the prophets doomed to the same destruction as horses made to run on the cliffs, or cattle put to plough in the sea.¹

With ourselves things are vastly better. Sharp practices in business may be not unknown. But it is increasingly recognized among us that honesty is the only sure ground of lasting success. Nor do we find partiality to any appreciable extent in our courts of law. Even judges may be swayed by personal passions and prejudices, but at all events they are proof against bribery.

¹ Amos 6:12.

Yet in our political life—the sacred fountain whence justice springs—charges of graft are freely hurled from side to side. Many of these charges may be invented, or at least exaggerated, for electioneering ends. Still they can hardly have been leveled without some foundation in fact. With such means of persuasion brought to bear upon the judgment of our rulers and lawgivers, we cannot hope to see society raised to the higher levels for which we work and pray. Every man, therefore, who loves his country and seeks to make her great and honorable in the councils of the world should throw the whole force of his influence against the unholy system. For no improvement in the material conditions of the people can atone for dishonesty at the heart. A pure and lofty social life can be built up only on the bedrock of integrity.

3. The prophets of Israel are equally emphatic in their condemnation of the use to which men so largely put their wealth.

It may be argued that a man may do what he pleases with his own, that if he love luxury he is free to indulge himself to his heart's content. But to the prophets indulgence was as grave a sin as either the cynical cruelty of the monopolist or the injustice of ill-got gains. There are few stronger pieces of ironical declamation in literature than the passage in which Amos holds up to righteous scorn the frivolity of the wealthier classes in Samaria, lolling on ivory couches and softly cushioned divans, tooting with fastidious taste the delicacies of "lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall,"

singing foolish songs to the twanging of the lyre, and fancying themselves fine singers like David, quaffing the while their bowlfuls of drained wine, and anointing themselves with the choicest of wines, wholly indifferent to the wounds of their people.² To Amos this irresponsible levity was not mere folly; it was black sin against both God and society. All honest wealth is from God: therefore the lord of wealth is responsible to God for the stewardship intrusted to him. Man is likewise a social being, to whom wealth comes, if it does come, through the various channels of social life that converge on him: thus society also has its interest in the destination of wealth. To spend one's means on pleasure, as if this were the end of life, is unsocial and inhuman. If the spirit of self-indulgence affects large classes of society it will spell deterioration and ruin. A people given over to frivolity cannot endure. History is full of pregnant examples: the captivity of Israel and Judah, the extinction of the light of Greece, the downfall of imperial Rome, and the sweeping aside of an effeminate Christendom by the sturdy hordes of Islam. Were it not that one believed in the sanity of the great body of the people, one must have viewed with grave concern the vulgar displays of luxury that in pre-war days characterized what is called society, in both Europe and America, and the mad quest for pleasure that infected the minds of the masses as well. For the love of luxury is not confined to the wealthy. In these days little is needed to satisfy the taste for pleasure; and the poor are only too prone to follow the lead of their

² Amos 6: 1-7.

masters. One has no desire, of course, to restrain the innocent enjoyments of the people. Recreation is good and refined surroundings are good, but the nation that is to live must have its heart set on the greater things. Levity saps alike the moral and physical strength of a people. Responsibility to God and duty is the mainspring of life.

There were two special forms of luxury that had acquired an ominous hold over Israel and are still too much with us—vices that tend more than any others to corrupt the national life—intemperance and impurity.

Out of the genial friendship which is stimulated by the fruitage of the vine there had grown up in Israel, as among other nations, the craving for strong drink that inflames the mind and renders it unfit for the responsibilities of life, confuses moral distinctions, poisons the joys of family life, wrecks homes and friendships, and degrades society. The prophets are keenly sensitive to the dangers of strong drink and exhaust their powers of warning and persuasion to arouse the conscience of their hearers to a true appreciation of these.

Ah! they that rise up early of mornings
 To follow after strong drink,
 That tarry late in the evening
 Till wine doth inflame them;
 Whose feasts are lute and harp,
 Timbrel and flute and wine,
 But the doing of Jahweh they heed not,
 And the work of His hands they
 regard not!
 Therefore my people are exiled,
 Exiled for lack of knowledge:
 Their nobles are famished with hunger,
 And their rabble parched with thirst.¹

¹ Isa. 5: 11-13.

These passionate indictments of drunkenness can never lose their effect. For there is no influence more inimical to social progress than drink. Do what you will to change a man's surroundings—give him a healthy home, with money enough to spend on means of livelihood and culture—but if he be still in the grip of alcohol and have opportunity to satisfy his craving, his palace will become a sty. One thinks with shame of the condition to which drink has reduced the slums of the Old Land, and of the shackles in which the liquor interest holds legislators enthralled even during the conduct of the Great War. America is much more happily situated in this respect. The hand of the monopolist has not been allowed to tie up the question; and with a more advanced public sentiment it has been possible to take big strides forward. These are but the promise of greater things. For the temperance reformer the future is bright with hope.

The other evil works more in the dark, but eats still deeper into the heart. There is nothing so degrading to human nature as impurity. This sin also had darkly tainted the commonwealth of Israel. No doubt its grosser manifestations came from other nations, where sensuality had assumed the veil of religion, but Israel lent itself all too readily to the evil influence. In their exposures of the vice of impurity the prophets are absolutely fearless. No false modesty prevents their laying bare its hideous deformity and its deadly results in heart and life. The directness of their speech, indeed, makes it almost intolerable to the modern reader. But

their words are well worth our study. For the sin is only too rife in all our cities and rural communities, and ever and again it raises its head and claims toleration. It may be too delicate a matter for the ordinary Christian teacher to pursue the sin into its hidden recesses, but when impurity flaunts itself he must speak out as freely as the prophets did in their day. Happily in this matter also the laws are with us. Let us do all we can to maintain their purity and to make of them no empty forms, but the chaste expression of clean, upright, strong, and honorable manhood. Purity means national health and prosperity; impurity, national corruption and death.

The prophets are often represented as mere critics of their age, with no practical outlook or constructive social policy, but this is a short-sighted view. The prophets were all ardent patriots who loved their native land and sought its highest weal. They saw that their people were bringing ruin on themselves through their godless deeds, and by their words of condemnation they tried to bring them to a better mind and so avert the ruin. Had the prophets' warnings been respected, the social movement of the time would have been, not arrested, but led along worthier lines. And, when Israel continued to plunge madly along the road of death, they still held fast their faith in God and the future, dreaming their dreams and laying well the foundations of a better world to be.

The basis of this new social order is *justice*. The prophets are as emphatic as Carlyle that "no beneficence, benevo-

lence, or other virtuous contribution will make good the want" of justice. When the crisis first became acute, Amos had called for justice as the only way of salvation.

Hate evil, and love good,
And set up justice!
Yahweh may yet be gracious
To the remnant of Joseph.¹

So in their visions of the future the prophets make justice the cornerstone of the new city and nation.

Then will I restore thy judges as at first,
And thy counsellors as at the beginning;
And afterward shalt thou be called the
township of justice,
The faithful city.²

Thus saith the Lord Yahweh:

Behold! I lay in Zion a stone that is tried,
A precious foundation-stone: he that believeth shall not be moved;
And justice will I make the line, and
righteousness the plummet.³

The prophetic conception of justice is both wide and deep. It includes, not merely impartial judgment in the courts, honesty in business, just wages, and equal rights, but the spirit of general fair play to every man. As Jeremiah puts it: "Execute justice and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor, and do no wrong, no violence to the stranger, the fatherless or the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place."⁴ Special stress is laid on the rights of the family. A just nation must defend the portion of the people against the intrigues of the land-grabber and in every way safeguard the

¹ Amos 5:15.

³ Isa. 28:16 f.

² Isa. 1:25 f.

⁴ Jer. 22:3.

sanctity of its family life as the strongest pillar of the state. The prophetic ideal for a rural community is that each man should sit under his own vine and fig tree, "with none to make him afraid,"¹ while the seer of the New Jerusalem pictures it as a hive of happy homes, "full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof."²

In this insistence on equal rights, the sanctity of home, and freedom for children to play in the streets—a striking anticipation of the modern demand for playgrounds—the prophets lift the notion of social justice to the higher plane of *brotherhood*. Justice is the foundation on which all rests, but brotherhood is the cement which holds the social structure together, and without which justice itself must fail. The ideal of brotherhood emerges as early as Hosea, the prophet of love, and blends with justice in Isaiah's great conception of holiness. But it is chiefly in the messianic visions—the shining points on which the prophets focus their aspirations—that the ideal receives its noblest embodiment. The coming King is the pattern of justice; but this is treated throughout as the other side of humanity and mercy. The wonderful Counselor and godlike Warrior is equally the Father of his people and Prince of Peace.³ He and his associates are "as an hiding-place from the wind and a covert from the tempest," unselfish guardians of civic peace, security, and well-being.⁴ The righteous branch, Yahweh Zidkenu, *Yahweh our Righteousness*,

brings forth salvation and security as the fruit of righteousness.⁵ He is a just King, that beareth salvation and cometh to his people in the spirit of meekness, "riding upon an ass, even a colt the foal of an ass."⁶

Though their chief concern is with Israel, the prophets see clearly that by itself Israel cannot reach its social ideal. Israel is but one in the brotherhood of nations, and can be saved only in the salvation of all. Thus in their highest flights they picture the nations streaming to Jerusalem for instruction in the ways of Yahweh, then beating their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning-hooks, learning no more the art of war, but dwelling together in mutual trust and sympathy, loving *peace* and pursuing it. A vision far enough removed from the tragic realities of the present! Yet the prophets are right in their analysis. The social question belongs not to any nation or nations: it is universal in its range, coextensive with the limits of humanity. While it may be necessary at times to fight for justice and humanity, the problem can be solved only in peace and by the realization of a common brotherhood of man. May this war prove in truth the end of war! Then let us turn with thankful hearts to the work of reconstruction, having the lesson burnt home to our conscience that justice and humanity toward all men are the only safeguard of social well-being.

The work of righteousness is peace,
And the fruit of justice eternal security.⁷

¹ Mic. 4:4.

³ Isa. 9:6.

⁵ Jer. 23:6.

⁷ Isa. 32:17.

² Zech. 8:5.

⁴ Isa. 32:2 ff.

⁶ Zech. 9:9.